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Contact: Athline Clark, (808) 587-0099

NOAA RELEASES NATIONAL STUDY OF U.S. CORAL REEF ECOSYSTEMS New Report Makes Case for an Integrated Observing System

The nation's coral reef ecosystems continue to face numerous stressors from both natural and human sources including overfishing, disease, pollution and climate change according to a new national assessment of the condition of U.S. shallow coral reef ecosystems. The report, "The State of Coral Reef Ecosystems of the United States and Pacific Freely Associated States: 2005," was authored by teams in 14 jurisdictions where the corals are found and was released today by NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The report indicates that management actions are moving in the right direction. NOAA and federal, state, territory and local partners have begun to implement "local action strategies" to reduce key threats to reefs. The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force and the U.S. Ocean Action Plan called for this sort of action.

"Healthy shallow coral reef ecosystems are a key factor for robust marine ecosystems and the economic well-being of many coastal communities," said retired Navy Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. "This report demonstrates the value of integrating monitoring efforts from local to regional and global scales and highlights the need to develop an integrated global earth observing system that would provide coastal managers the best possible information for ensuring the health of the world's coral reefs and other ocean ecosystems."

The report marks the first attempt to bring together quantitative results of monitoring data and information collected by federal, state, territory, commonwealth, non-governmental, private, and academic partners to provide an overall status report on the condition of U.S. coral reef ecosystems.

In the main Hawaiian Islands, the report notes that 30 percent of the west Hawaii coast has been designated as "Fisheries Replenishment Areas" and that studies confirmed increases in the abundance of the top ten aquarium fish species inside the designated areas. Also on the positive side of the report ledger, the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands continue to support a healthy ecosystem population of apex predators and other fish, coral, algae, invertebrates and seabird species, many of which are found only in that region.

Of concern in Hawaii and the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is the growing presence of alien marine algae that pose a significant threat to the islands' unique marine biodiversity. The report found that the NWHI's first recorded coral bleaching event impacted 77 percent of the corals in the three northern atolls in 2002, and that a milder but still significant bleaching event occurred in 2004 indicating that climate change and coral bleaching as well as disease threats are increasing.

Marine debris remains a major concern in the NWHI while coastal development, pollution and runoff, tourism and recreation pressures, fishing, coral and live reef species trade, and the presence of aquatic invasive species are significant issues facing coral managers in the populated main Hawaiian islands.

The report fulfills a goal of the U.S. National Coral Reef Action Strategy and will be highlighted at the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force meeting in early November in the Republic of Palau.

"This report shows the effectiveness of collaboration by federal, state, territorial and private partners to help conserve coral reefs. It is a prime example of the coordinated efforts the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force is fostering," said Craig Manson, assistant secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks in the U.S. Department of the Interior and co-chair of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force. Coral reef monitoring activities are now being conducted in 14 jurisdictions, yielding important data about water quality, corals and other organisms inhabiting the seafloor, as well as fish and other species that live in coral ecosystems. Investments in public outreach and education are increasing public awareness of coral reef ecology and conditions affecting reef ecosystems. Scientists have expanded digital mapping of shallow water coral reef ecosystems, and local managers have revised fishery laws to protect reef species and habitats, increased local coral reef management capacity, and established coral reef protected areas.

"The good news is that there are monitoring systems in place which will continue to strengthen the cooperative governance and stewardship of our coral ecosystems," said Timothy R.E. Keeney, deputy assistant secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere and co-chair of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force. "This is an excellent example of the Bush Administration's shared conservation efforts which place a strong emphasis in enhancing on-the-ground conservation results."

The 522-page report was coordinated by NOAA's Center for Coastal Monitoring and Assessment in partnership with NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program. The majority of the information contained in the report appears in the jurisdiction chapters. It includes contributions from over 160 scientists and managers working as part of a growing coral reef integrated observing system.

The report details coral reef conditions in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Navassa, Florida, the Flower Garden Banks, the Main Hawaiian Islands, the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, American Samoa, the Pacific Remote Island Areas, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the Republic of Palau.

Data and other information derived from NOAA's coral reef monitoring and assessment efforts are available at CoRIS, NOAA's Coral Reef Information System Web site. It provides a single point of access for aerial photos of coastal areas, digital maps, navigational charts, photo mosaics, monitoring reports, research papers and other items related to coral reef ecosystems.

The NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program supports effective management and sound science to preserve, sustain and restore valuable coral reef ecosystems. The CRCP is a partnership between NOAA Line Offices working on coral reef issues, including the National Ocean Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research and the National Environmental Satellites, Data and Information Service. The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force was established in 1998 to help lead U.S. efforts to address the coral reef crisis. It includes the heads of 12 federal agencies; the governors of seven states territories and commonwealths; and heads of the three Pacific Freely Associated States. The task force is co-chaired by the Secretary of Commerce and the Secretary of the Interior. The first coral reef report was produced by the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science in 2002.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with our federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global Earth observation network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

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On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov/>

NOAA's National Ocean Service: <http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/>

2005 State of Coral Reef Ecosystem Report:

http://ccma.nos.noaa.gov/ecosystems/coralreef/coral_report_2005

NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program: <http://www.coralreef.noaa.gov>

NOAA's Coral Reef Information System (CoRIS): <http://coris.noaa.gov>

GEOSS: <http://www.noaa.gov/eos.html>